
*Estudios de
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*Conceptos clave de la lingüística aplicada /
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MATERIALS DESIGN IN L2 LEARNING

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Last year in this space Jane Arnold (2009: 145) began by quoting Earl Stevick's (1980: 4) affirmation: "Success [in language learning] depends less on materials, techniques and language analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom". This emphasis on the importance of the classroom in language learning is widespread and usually unquestioned. Even an organization such as the Centro Universitario de Idiomas (CUID) at the Universidad de Educación a Distancia (UNED) in Spain, which has many students who find it difficult to attend lessons in classrooms, encourages its English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to attend lessons in classrooms if they can. The assumption seems to be that classroom activities are an important ingredient in successful language learning.

Certainly, most mainstream general-purpose EFL course books are classroom-based. Their activities characteristically require guidance and

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feedback from a teacher, and interaction with fellow students (for the many pair- and group-work activities). While classroom-based activities are abundant, material allowing EFL students working autonomously to study vocabulary and grammar, and to learn to read, write, listen and speak is conspicuous by its absence. Failure to make adequate provision for self-study can have serious consequences. Allwright and Bailey (1991: 163) comment:

[...] [such] modern communicative textbooks [...] can be quite useless to learners [...] if, for instance, they are trying to study independently, or to catch up on a lesson they have missed. Learners may come to see such materials as generally unhelpful, and as reason for feeling they are never going to succeed [...]

The absence of self-study materials may be one reason why, in general, levels of attainment in classroom-based foreign language learning are poor and why 'most language learning is associated with relative failure' (Skehan, 1996: 18). It also, of course, makes language learning difficult for those who are unable to attend classes.

The question then arises: is it possible to design materials which will enable students to learn English on their own, studying when and where they want and for as long as they wish without ever having to enter a classroom? Certainly the autonomous study of bilingual word lists (van der Laan, 2009: 66-67) is an excellent initial step towards acquisition of the vocabulary of some nine to ten thousand word families that an advanced learner of English needs (McCarthy, 2007: 55). Knowing the basic form-meaning links of the most frequent English words makes it much easier to read and listen to texts, and when words are re-encountered in their habitual environments additional learning about how they are used can take place naturally (Schmitt, 2010: 30-31). It is not that vocabulary learning on this scale is more conveniently carried out away from the classroom, but rather that it is difficult to see how it can ever fit into conventional classroom schedules. Similarly, the autonomous study of Grammar (see, for example, Chacón Beltrán and Senra Silva, 2010: 8-9) is likely to be more time-efficient for the same fundamental reason; students working alone can concentrate on the points which they (rather than others) need to study.

Much the same is true of the receptive skills. Reading, an invaluable source of input, is an essentially individual and private activity since people like to read and re-read at their own speed in their own time, while the listening exercises which traditionally feature in language textbooks are a relic from the days before the information technology revolution. Satellite and cable television, DVDs, the World Wide Web, Internet and new telephone services like Skype mean that it is no longer true as it often was in the 1990s that the English lesson is the only opportunity for many students to listen to authentic English. These new technologies bring huge advantages which classroom activities cannot hope to emulate: DVDs, for example, are an excellent way of improving listening skills, especially if students watch hours of programmes they particularly like and the subtitles are a faithful transcription of what is said. Audio books are an important resource for the same reason.

Perhaps then it is the production skills, writing and speaking, which account for the popular assumption that a classroom is essential for language learning: who, after all, will correct the mistakes students make when they write and speak if there is no teacher? Yet writing is often not adequately dealt with in EFL classrooms. Since mistakes are learning opportunities, it would surely be desirable for students to write as often as they wish and to receive detailed corrective feedback on all their mistakes, but many students say that too few of their compositions are marked by teachers and that they would like less cryptic explanations of their mistakes (abbreviations such as T and WO, for example, are frequently used to indicate problems with tense and word order respectively). One of the principal reasons why more compositions and essays are not set is that teachers with large numbers of students are anxious not to increase their own work loads, and it seems likely that one of the reasons why cryptic correction codes are so widely used is that hard-pressed teachers simply do not have time to explain mistakes in more detail (Lawley, 2004: 332-333). The development of computer-mediated technology at the UNED which enables students to detect and correct the mistakes in their free-form writing suggests a promising alternative which allows students to write whenever they wish, receiving detailed user-friendly 'just-in-time' feedback on their (not others') mistakes (Chacón Beltrán, 2009: 193). Working alone like this has an important affective advantage too: "Time to think, opportunities to rehearse and

receive feedback, and the greater likelihood of success reduce anxiety and can result in increased participation and language learning” (Crandall, 1999: 233).

The assumption that a classroom is the best place to learn to speak also seems unfounded. Practising speaking may only be a small part of learning to speak; it could be that the large-scale autonomous study of vocabulary and grammar and abundant independent reading, listening, and writing will result in increased confidence and motivation which in turn will produce what Arnold (2009: 147) calls a Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Even activities which practise speaking do not always require a classroom; indeed exercises which encourage students to adopt and use the language items presented to them as input, the ultimate aim of all language learning, may be best carried out away from the time constraints of the classroom. The exercise reproduced below is an example:

10L1

Listen to a lecture about Dr Johnson’s letter to Lord Chesterfield (TRACK 10). Try to understand as much as possible. Then write an account of the lecture, as complete and informative as possible, for someone who has never heard it.

10L2

Listen again. Do you learn anything new? If so, how significant is it?

10L3. Read the audioscript of the lecture found in the Appendix. Did you miss anything significant?

10L4

Practise giving the lecture yourself.

(Lawley & Chacón Beltrán, 2010: 57)

The FluenCi project (Campbell, 2010) is similarly concerned with the conversion of input into output, focusing on helping students to use spontaneously and appropriately in conversation the same discourse markers, expressions used for the preservation of face, for politeness and hedging, and

to express vagueness and approximation that native English speakers use. And again, the materials, using state-of-the-art technology to allow students to practise using the high frequency multi-word interactional items with which native English speakers manage conversations, work best when students can progress at their own pace and in their own time; that is, away from the classroom.

There are good reasons then for thinking that classrooms are far from essential for language learning. Even people who find attending lessons easy and enjoyable should ask themselves if those lessons are in fact the best use of the limited time they have available for language learning. Many classroom activities after all are little more than thinly disguised tests of students' knowledge of English. Exercises that require students to 'Read the passage and answer the questions' or to 'Listen to the tape and answer the questions' or to 'Fill in the gaps' are, for example, primarily testing not teaching mechanisms. So prevalent indeed is the emphasis on testing that it normally passes unnoticed. One of the main reasons why the results of language classes are so often disappointing may be that very little of the lesson is actually spent teaching and learning. There are of course good reasons for this state of affairs; the ubiquitous testing reinforces the classroom power structure, making the respective roles of teacher and student very clear. Perhaps it would be better to accept this reality rather than to struggle against it. If, as this paper has suggested, language learning can be more effective when students study on their own, then the classroom can become instead the place for students to show what they know; that is, they can put the language skills they have acquired outside the classroom to test inside it. While those who do not have access to a classroom (and indeed for those who do), the true test comes as always in the real world.

But before the testing comes the learning. Many will accept that languages *can* be learned outside the classroom, but this paper suggests that many students *should* learn them outside, and that more energy should be devoted to creating materials that will help them do so. Ultimately, it is imaginative materials design which determines where language learning can take place and, to a considerable extent, how successful it is.

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